Characteristics of Formal Academic Writing

Use Specific Language

Use of specific terms—in place of general ones—will provide more impact and information for the reader. "Book" is a general term, while "*The Scarlet Letter,* by Nathaniel Hawthorne" is more specific.

Use physically concrete language in place of vague, abstract terms to give the reader a clear understanding. Terms like beauty, lovely, ugly and the like are vague. Be specific when the image matters.

> Ex: *The scenery was beautiful.*
> Revised ex: *The bright green grass and the clear blue afternoon sky was perfect for picnicking.*

Avoid Clichés

Clichés are overused and unoriginal. Leave them out of academic writing.

> Ex: *He took to it **like a duck to water***.
> Revised ex: *He accomplished the task **with little effort***.
>
> Ex: *The chances are **few and far between***.
> Revised ex: *The chances are **very rare***.
>
> Ex: *His grandfather was **as blind as a bat***.
> Revised ex: *His grandfather had **a severe vision problem***.

These are just some examples of clichés. In general, remember that if a phrase sounds too common, it is likely a cliché and should be avoided.

Use Third Person Voice

First person is "I," or "we;" second person is "you," and third person is "he," "she," "one," or "they." Academic writing, unless stated otherwise by the professor, should always be in the third person.

Choose Active over Passive Voice

Active voice usually uses fewer words and emphasizes the doer of the action, thus making the writing clearer and livelier for the audience. For example, "*He gave the paper to his professor*" is an active sentence. Passive voice puts the receiver of the action first, and then either puts the doer of the action after the verb, or does not name the doer at all. Passive voice should only be used if the doer of the action is unimportant or unknown. To say it another way, with active voice, the subject of the sentence acts, but in passive voice, the subject is acted upon. For example, "*The paper was given to his professor by him.*"

Choose Present Tense over Past Tense

Present tense is easier to read, makes the information more immediate, and brings the reader into the work much more than does past tense. For Humanities, papers should be in the present tense. Some subjects, particularly the sciences, do prefer past tense. If there is a question, consult the professor, who always has the authority to request a particular tense in his or her assignment.

Past tense ex: *The author wrote…*
Present tense ex: *The author writes…*

Words to Avoid

- **Avoid euphemisms; be straightforward.**
Euphemisms are "nice" words that are used in the place of certain realistic words.

    Ex: *His cousin **passed away***.
    Revised ex: *His cousin **died***.

- **Replace neologisms with more commonly accepted words.**
Neologisms are new words which have not been widely accepted in formal language throughout society.

    Ex: *He is a **player***.
    Revised ex: *He is a **philanderer***.

- **Avoid slang and colloquialisms.**

    Ex: *He is **totes** smart.*
    Revised ex: *He is **very** intelligent*.

- **Avoid unnecessary buzzwords which add no meaning to a sentence.**

    Ex: *She was only interested in **the bottom line***.
    Revised ex: *She was only interested in **the profits***.

- **Avoid offensive words, phrases, and clauses.**
Profanity, rude statements, and sexist language have no place in academic writing.

- **Replace expletives* with specific, active verbs.**
Expletives are "there" or "it" when followed by a form of the verb "to be"— used to begin a clause or sentence.

    Ex: ***It was** on Monday that she called*.
    Revised ex: *She called on Monday.*

- **Avoid using an informal tone.**
There should be a more formal emotional distance between the writer and the subject, as well as appropriate emotional distance between the writer and his or her audience.

    Ex: *The candidate is a **guy** with **lots of possibilities***.
    Revised ex: *The candidate is a graduate of Harvard who has worked to bring needed help to the homeless in Washington.*

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* Although the word "expletive" has come to mean "curse word" in common language, here it refers to filler words that have little meaning or use.